Altoona High School Reunion
August 8, 2015
John Buchanan

I'm glad to be here. Here…at the 60th Reunion of the Altoona High School Class of 1955. But also…simply…here. 60th Reunion. Given the fact that we are all approaching 80, the Biblical four score, it's very good simply to be here.

Sue…Sue Kearney. Class of 1956, my wife of 56 years, sends her greetings and asks to be remembered. We made a deal. She wouldn't have to come to my reunion and I wouldn't have to attend hers next year. We have 5 adult children, all married, and 13 grandchildren. We have lived in downtown Chicago for the past 30 years. We love living in the middle of the city and intend to stay there.

Something like 61 years ago you elected me class president, an honor I have remembered and cherished over the years. It was also the easiest job I have ever had. I've done essentially nothing for the last six decades. Jim Daski is much too nice to say it, but I'm sure he was thinking…"He hasn't done a thing for sixty years. You'd think he could at least show up." So I did. And I am very glad to be here and to see you all. I also want to thank Jim and his committee for their good work in planning this reunion and bringing us together.

Jim was kind enough to ask me to say a few words. I thought long and hard about it, took the Horseshoe down from the shelf and looked at every page, every picture.

That faculty, my goodness, what a group of unique individuals they were.

Joseph Maddocks
Edgar Brooks
Paul Adams
Wilbert Hoffman
Paul Morse
Una Small
John Monti
Angella Unversagt

They were not to be trifled with. Some of them were flat out intimidating. I watched with interest and amusement as my children's teachers, and now my grandchildren's teachers have become so accessible, attractive, pleasant, kinder. They are their students' buddies, confidants, friends! I was pretty sure Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Morse, Una Small…hated me and wanted to have as little to do with me as possible. My grandchildren's

teachers are so happy to see them they welcome them to class with a hug! Can you imagine Miss Unversagt, Miss Small?

Why did they do it – choose school teaching? It certainly wasn't for the money. I've concluded that they really did care, wouldn't in a million years have called it love – but that's what it was…loved and cared enough to want us to be more than we ever thought we could be: were willing to get up every morning and come to work at the High School and all day long put up with out foolishness, inattention and – some of us at least – downright orneriness, to prod and push and demand more from us than we ever would have given of our own volition. And so, I'm grateful for them.

In addition to looking at their pictures and reading their names, I did something in sixty years I had never done before. I read the message in the front of the book from the School Board: W.H. Burchfield, N. Gwynne Dodson, Norman Ernest, John Hill, Marjorie March, Eleanor Maurer, Paul Reynolds, Roy Thompson. It's pretty much a thankless job, serving on a school board is. It takes a lot of time, there is never enough money, the needs are all always urgent, someone is always unhappy. You have to care a lot. In 1955 the Altoona School District payroll budget was $2.3 million dollars, making it one of the biggest businesses in the city. There were 641 employees and one of the big decisions the Board made was to spending $30,000 to install new, modern up-to-date fluorescent light fixtures in the classrooms.

And then I turned to the next page with very imposing picture of Dr. A. Bruce Deniston, Superintendent. I imagine Dr. Deniston wrote the same boilerplate message every year – but I read it anyhow. He said that as we stepped out of Altoona High School and into our futures, whatever they were, he hoped and urged us to remember a list of virtues – he call them "Old Fashioned Virtues." I'm glad I read it. It's a remarkable list.

Intellectual honesty
Courtesy
Courage
Humility
Common sense
Hard work
Ambition
Loyalty to family, friends, and country
Consideration for other people

That's a pretty good list. A belated thank you, Dr. Deniston. Well done.

"Where are you from?" I'm still glad to say, Altoona, Pennsylvania, quintessential, authentic blue-collar, working people, homemakers, many of whom were first generation immigrants from Italy, Sicily, Germany, Ireland. They worked hard, came home tired and dirty, two weeks vacation during

which they painted the house or laid a new sidewalk, and lived with the economic uncertainty of period layoffs from the railroad. They worked in other industries, in business, banks, hospitals. And they created a safe, stable community for us, and a school system that pushed, prodded, scolded, sometimes smacked us around, occasionally inspired us, and that cared enough about us, loved us really, to expect us to learn how to work hard, to perform and produce and I, for one, am eternally grateful for every one of them.